

## **Mark 1:1-8<sup>v vi</sup>**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judaeen countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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### **<sup>v</sup> About Mark 1:1-8**

Verse 1 stands as the title of the new literary form that Mark created. The word gospel, (Greek, evangelion), in secular usage meant "good news," often about an important event such as the birthday of the Emperor Augustus. Mark's good news of Jesus Christ includes both the message that Jesus proclaimed and the person and significance of Jesus himself. Thus, his "gospel" is not only a life of Jesus but also a proclamation of the foundational belief that Jesus is the promised Jewish messiah ("Christ") and "Son of God."

A messenger of preparation was awaited as a herald of the last days and was expected to embody the prophetic spirit of Elijah. John the Baptist is described in terms reminiscent of Elijah. John's "baptism of repentance" (v. 4) was a customary ritual of purification for Gentile converts to Judaism, but John warned the Jews not to rely upon their physical descent from Abraham to ensure a relationship with God. They, too, needed conversion.

John's baptism may also have been a sign of one's repentance and purification by God. Repentance describes the change of heart demanded by personal conversion—a turning away

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from sin and a return to loyalty toward God. John promises that the One to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit, pouring out upon all people a new communion with God.

## <sup>vi</sup> **Reflection and Response**

Today's readings strike a balance between two dynamics. They remind us that we are both in the present and part of a larger story, one that stretches before we were born and after we will die. Embedded in time, we chafe at its constraints. The summer is too short, the winter too long, and the weekends never ample enough.

Yet if the valleys are to be filled and the highways made straight, it must occur through human efforts in time. We must make a conscious decision to baptize the present moment and to live each day as if it contained a thousand years.

Our unlikely model is John the Baptist: He is more than a nut clothed in camel's hair. What was it about John that drew people to the wilderness to sacrifice their urban comforts and respond to his challenge? He has no illusions about himself. He points beyond his own ministry with a humility that the Judeans must have found refreshing. Furthermore, he moves them to repentance and offers them hope. Oddly enough, they trade their security for uncertainties.

Would we respond as generously to heralds of good tidings? Much as we may desire a change of heart and an end to illusion, we are also reluctant to surrender our secure niche. Conversion would tear us out of our own egos, a wrenching that would definitely cause discomfort. And so we continue in a rut that may have ceased to be life-giving but is at least familiar.

The ultimate irony is that we await a God who has already come. We live in the already and the not yet, at the point where the timeless intersects time. We rejoice in what we are, while conscious of what we are not. We are at home with paradox.